

A potential problem?

Waltham, Mass. — President Ford may be a forgiving man, but a number of his top aides can cook up a lot of trouble for President-elect Carter before their defenestration on Jan. 20,

John P.
Roche



1977. The transition, in other words, is more than just a friendly arrangement for turning over power: from Carter's perspective it should involve taking on security experts, particularly from disposal units.

I am not suggesting that Jack Marsh, a man of integrity who heads the GOP transition team in the Executive Office of the President would prepare the White House to self-destruct on Jan. 21. Nor would Brent Scowcroft, presidential assistant for National Security Affairs, spend early January consigning vital foreign policy documents to the shredder. In the White House the real problem arises from the preposterous tradition that "presidential papers" belong to the President. And there is great uncertainty over precisely what stuff falls into this ambiguous category.

Two examples come to mind.

First, the autopsy photographs taken at Bethesda Naval Hospital of the assassinated John Kennedy. In Nov. 1963, nobody dreamed that three years later there would be a booming industry built around conspiracy theories of John Kennedy's murder. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who otherwise would have been personally hanging conspirators to Dallas lamp posts, announced flatly that Oswald was a loner. The autopsy pictures routinely went to the Kennedy archives.

Regrettably in the light of subsequent fantasies, the Warren Commission — out of respect for Jacqueline Kennedy — did not introduce them

into evidence. By 1966, when conspiracy-mongers were conjecturing two or even three Oswalds, a puff of smoke on a grassy knoll (from smokeless powder?), and a bullet coming from the front, these photos were essential evidence.

Finally (at my suggestion), President Lyndon Johnson got the attorney general to appoint five top forensic pathologists to evaluate those dreadful items, temporarily retrieved from the Kennedy archives. The experts unanimously supported the findings of the Warren Commission. However, the photos then were returned to private custody — and the argument continued. No sensitive person wants them splashed across newspapers, magazines or TV screens, but they should be available to qualified investigators.

Second, as the countdown for the Middle East war of 1967 continued, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban arrived at the White House with a 1957 memo from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to the Israelis promising that, if Israel relinquished the Sinai and Gaza Strip it had occupied in the 1956 war, the United States would guarantee its future security. However, Eban's copy had marginal notes in Dulles' handwriting further emphasizing the extent of our commitment.

Chaos ensued: Where was our copy? The State Department was ransacked, former President Dwight Eisenhower opened his files, and finally the original was located — in the Dulles papers at Princeton University.

President Johnson scorched the wallpaper in the Oval Office on what kind of way this was to run a country. But when he departed in January, 1969, about 40 truckloads of "his" papers went to Texas with him.

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